

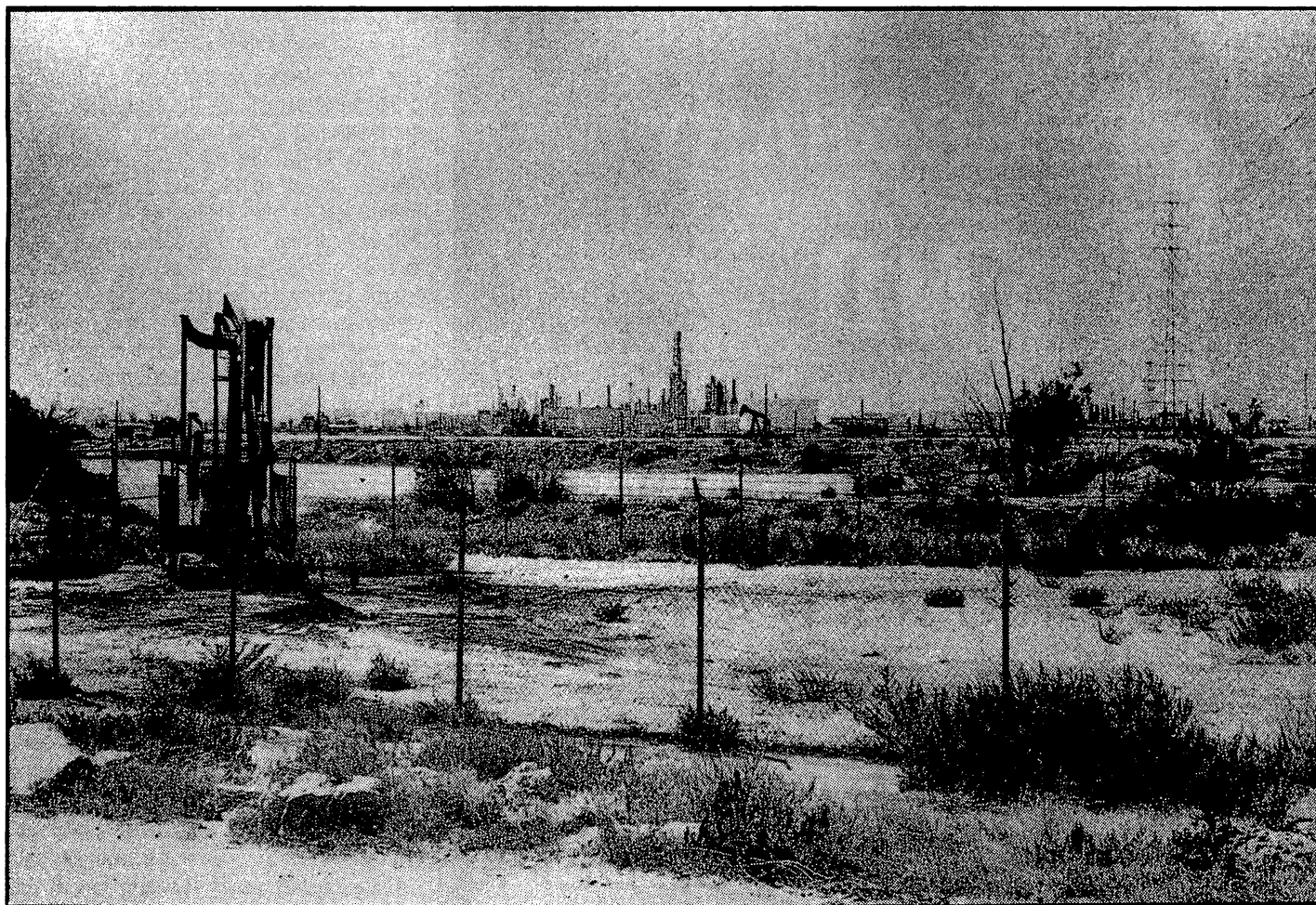
DEATH



in

BAKERSFIELD

ANSWER Me! *spends July 4th*
in the "All-America City"



Beautiful, beautiful Bakersfield.

They call it a “dry heat,” this choking air that assaults us in thick, blurry waves, dulling our senses and slowly melting us. This type of heat can shrink a grape into a raisin while you watch. It’s dry enough to turn lungs into chili pods. There’s no escape, for the sun’s rays ricochet off of chrome, glass, and mirrors. I feel like a pasty Cornish hen being roasted by the withering blast. Sweat and suntan lotion form a milky slime on my skin as I wilt in a crucible of patriotism.

July 4th, 1991. Happy, happy birthday, America! Tonight, pretty bombs will go **BLAM!** and **POW!** and **THWOMB!** in the sky. Families will congregate to eat charred red meat and chug down some brewskers. I have my own fond remembrances of this day: mewling my two-year-old intestines out at concussive fireworks, getting stitches under my eye in a later childhood accident, and dropping some windowpane acid at a mid-eighties laser show. It’s a day off, a chance to blend into the crowd and watch shit blow up.

Call me a moral defective, call me a sociopath—just don’t call me, because I won’t pick up the phone—but I don’t sit on any side of any political fence. Anyone who does is a simpleminded sucker. I’m neither offended nor uplifted by the 4th of July. Sure, America’s past is a gory saga of plundered land and exploitation, but what nation’s isn’t? We didn’t *vote* this country into existence in 1776—British heads had to roll! Indians had to be cleared out! Slaves had to be imported to juice the economy! Whether that’s good or bad depends on how *you* feel it affected you. If I were black or Native American, I’d probably think ‘America’ is a sinister concept. If I were a rich WASP, I’d probably gush with patriotic fervor. But I’m neither, so **IDON’T GIVE A FUCK**. Don’t start breathing fast and getting all moral about it—deep in your heart, you don’t give a fuck about me, either.

Liberals are dumb because they don’t understand that history is a

murderous power struggle and that their standard of living was purchased with blood; conservatives are stupid because they try to justify the murderous urge. At *ANSWER Me!*, we’re comfortable with ourselves; we don’t need to justify anything. When people talk about man’s “higher nature,” we break into gales of laughter. We know everyone’s capable of murder, so why fight it? Once you accept that you’re an animal, you can relax and let others graze, too.

But not everyone’s so tolerant, so us cloven-hoofed critters decided to spend the 4th in Bakersfield, which boasts of being the “All-America City.” Only a hundred and thirteen miles out of L.A., its residents speak in a southern-fried twang. They use phrases such as “soda pop” and “you bet.” Country-and-western gods Buck Owens and Merle Haggard’s careers sprouted on these dusty streets. Bakersfield is California’s shit-kickin’est, straw-chewin’est, hot-diggety-doggiest town!

Pearl of Kern County, Bakersfield sits in the midst of such dazzling urban centers as Taft, Oildale, and Wasco. The area’s clean, linear, Protestant farmlands could be Nebraska or South Dakota, but they’re not. That’s what’s so fucking scary. Bakersfield is an overgrown truck stop on the edge of the vast, brutal Mojave Desert. It’s a rural outpost in an urban state, a burg unaffected by flotation tanks or liposuction. People here are isolated, suspicious of intruders. Culture is an equal mix of Dust Bowl doggedness and sun-shriveled sensory deprivation. It’s God’s lil’ acre.

“This is the salad bowl of the nation,” brags *Bakersfield: The Official Visitors [sic] Guide*, “and in the center of the plate-glass flat land is the cluster of lights called Bakersfield. At twilight it looks like a beacon in a quiet land.” Jesus Christ, that’s inspiring!

But we picked the hottest July 4th that Bakersfield ever recorded. Our warm, sweaty butts perch on the gravelly sidewalk at the corner of 20th

TEMPORARY NO PARKING

THURSDAY
9 A.M. TO 1 P.M.

BY ORDER OF THE
BAKERSFIELD POLICE DEPT.
TOW AWAY ZONE

and Chester. "We are celebrating all the wars today," says the amplified voice of Rusty Shoop, news anchorman for Bakersfield's Channel 17. Rusty's across the street from us in a canopied judges' stand. You can tell he's a big potato in these parts—they made him emcee of their July 4th parade, dag nabbit! "It's only gonna get up to a hundred and eleven today," he joshes. "No big deal. Welcome to Kern County." Our faith in journalism ebbed a bit when Rusty was proven wrong. It only reached a hundred and ten.

I hate a parade. As we wait for it to begin, the Bakersfield biker cops play with their motorcycle sirens, modulating the loud BLOOPS for comic, singsong effect. It's shrill, it's irritating, but whom can I complain to? The parade kicks off with more ungodly, spine-shivering sirens, these from a local ambulance company. Decontextualized onto cassette, the cacophonous alarms and slabs of white noise sound like a ghetto aflame or the Battle of Britain, but they're not. It's family entertainment. That's what's so fucking scary.

Next comes an army tank, propelled by triumphant soldiers. "I don't think that thing's loaded, but I'm glad you brought it down here today," jokes Rusty. "Thanks for bein' here! How you kids doin'? I bet it's hot inside that thing, isn't it? God bless you guys."

A rat-a-tat drill team slogs mechanically past us, then a Boy Scout troop whose adult leader barks out his marching orders with a *little too much* enthusiasm. "Here's some of our *younger* men in uniform today," says Rusty, tugging at our heartstrings.

At the tempo of a funeral procession, the Bakersfield Classic Thunderbird Club creeps down Chester Avenue, each shiny 'Bird carrying a veteran of a different war. Following the T-Birds is a string of drab personae: councilpersons, VFW members, county supervisors, and state assemblymen. Then comes a Bakersfield Fire Department truck carting more Desert Storm veterans. "Good-looking fire engine," marvels Rusty. "See if you can put out this heat today." Members of the Valley Bible

Fellowship march by stiffly, toting a banner which reads, "IN THE ARMY OF GOD." Rusty says, "God bless you guys." Another ambulance department brings up the rear, their sirens serrating the infernal air.

As the crowd disperses, we meet Buddy, a veteran in his sixties with an ashtray-sized indentation in his forehead. In a Weehawken, N.J., accent that could scrape barnacles off an aircraft carrier, he tells us he's Jewish and fought against Hitler. Buddy says he weighs eighty-seven pounds, down from over two hundred. He proudly shows us his concave skull, recalling how doctors operated near his brain after a bus slammed into him. He hands us a medical document describing him as "childlike and gullible... nonviolent." We ask what July 4th means to him. "Independence Day," he answers. Our requests for elaboration prove fruitless.

Soul-stirring speeches are planned at City Hall. It's only a few blocks away, but the walk would immolate us. We retreat for the car. En route, we see a morbid memento inside the window of a closed office: a copy of the traffic citation James Dean received hours before he crashed his convertible sportster near Wasco.

Since it's had all morning to broil, our car is an oppressive coffin. Even the air conditioner blows warm and musty. The vinyl steering wheel and armrests could cauterize skin on contact.

Under the merciless yellow orb, the City Hall ceremony takes place unhindered. "The resurgence of patriotism that Desert Storm rekindled is gratifying," says one aging speaker, poised dramatically between a podium and a church bell. "It is too bad that it takes an Adolf Hitler or Saddam Hussein to light our fire."

We ask an Hispanic Vietnam vet what the 4th means to him. "Well, [it's] very important," he says. "It means freedom, patriotism, and a welcome back home to the Persian Gulf and Vietnam vets. I was wounded in Vietnam. I served two tours over there, and I came back in early '69, and we didn't have a welcome home for no Vietnam vets, and we consider this as a long-overdue welcome home for us." We thank him as he limps away.

At the podium is a Persian Gulf vet, possibly the most wooden speaker in existence. "America held together not only on the battlefields," he intones, "but also on the streets of the United States.... Your backing helped us win the war against Eye-rack."

Looking like some M*A*S*H understudy, a woman in battle fatigues steps up to the mike. "I'm deeply and personally honored by just *being* here today," she says, and we wonder if the sun's getting to her. She recounts how her husband, a Viet vet, reassured her as she wrote her will, promising a safe return to Bakersfield. "I'm honored by...my mother, who's back there wearing the MY DAUGHTER WEARS

COMBAT BOOTS T-shirt," she says, and the listeners chuckle. "I finally extracted from her a promise that she would look in the body bag when I came home." The listeners stop chuckling.

To break the tension, a prim woman with an acoustic guitar leads the audience in a medley of musical fascism which includes "Proud to Be an American" and "This Land is Your Land." Kids rove about unsupervised, taking pretend rifle shots at each other with their flagpoles. The folk songstress leaves, and a pesky seven-year-old male treats the crowd to *his* version of "Proud to Be an American," sounding like Alfalfa Schweitzer if he had been raised on a cotton plantation.

As the ceremony ends, the chief speaker asks the crowd to "ring the bell to show our freedom rings. Our freedom includes sacrifice. Please step [up] and ring the bell. Each and every one of you." Each and every

one of us does.

At no one's prodding, a man in full colonial garb takes the stage and begins reciting the Declaration of Independence. His honking accent is reminiscent of Mr. Healey's from *Green Acres*. He doesn't stop with the mere text, but continues rattling off the signers' names: "George Clymer, Pennsylvania... William Ellery, Rhode Island," etc. Pockets of foam form around his flapping lips.

I ask how he's able to endure the temperature dressed in a heavy Continental Army uniform. "Soldiers are used to heat," he proclaims. "Being a soldier is always miserable. It's never easy."

A soldier? He says he served in the armed forces in Southeast Asia. "I think that Bakersfield is a lot more patriotic now than when I came home from Vietnam in '73," he says, his eyes darting away. "I can testify to



The U.S.A.'s military might: so strong, so devastating, it nearly gives a guy a boner.

that. They thought I was a murderer. My mother and father were scared shit of me when I came back from Vietnam. They didn't know when I was gonna pick up a rifle and haul off and kill 'em." Uneasy silence. We wish him luck and leave, two steps at a time.

They're handing out awards for today's parade at the local American Legion post. Glossies of war vets in horn-rimmed glasses line the halls like some Shriners' purgatory, but the air conditioner works and they serve free Dixie cups of coffee. The preamble to the Legion's constitution is hand-painted on one wall. Among other goals, it says the group bonds together "to preserve the memories and incidents of our associations in the Great Wars" and "to combat the autocracy of both the classes and the masses to make right the master of might." In other words, to spill blood only for *good* causes.

I bump into Buddy, the vet with the dented head, and we sit at a table with him. I ask if he's happy we won the war. "I knew you boys were gonna win the war," he says, mistaking me for someone dumb enough to risk my life for cheap gasoline. I'm not *that* Californian. Buddy launches into a discourse involving Bush, "Reagan," Israel, Congress, and the FBI that could politely be called rambling. He frequently interchanges World War II and Desert Storm references, calling the latter Desert Fox. "I wouldn't be surprised if you go out there again," he tells me. "You're still under orders, right?" Right. Buddy leans closer: "Go in there and wipe Germany off the map."

After a stultifying series of awards, an interminable procession of silver plates and thank-yous, we again spot the Vietnamese vet wearing Paul Revere threads. As we exit the Legion post with him onto the flaming mid-afternoon streets, he slings a colonial flag over his shoulder and declares, "Life is never easy in the infantry." He asks us to join him in a twenty-mile hike under the hellish sun to Memorial Stadium, where they'll be shooting off fireworks in a few hours. Think I'll pass. Bathed in sweat, we sprint back to the car's safety.

A conservative radio jock is bitching about Jello Biafra's "Stars and Stripes of Corruption," some lyric about wiping your ass on Old Glory. "That's disgusting, that's repulsive, and it's sad that it's gotten to this point in this country," he fumes. He draws a parallel between Christ on the cross and our soldiers in Desert Storm, claiming that we need a sacrifice to rescue us from evil.

It's too hot to think. We stop at a city park situated along a stream. There's a breeze, but it feels like God's hair dryer. We roost at a bench where a young black man is sipping from a brown bag. His neck is covered in flaking skin and pink scar tissue. Mannered and articulate,



"Being a soldier is always miserable. It's never easy."

he says his name is Charles, a Zimbabwe native who's lived four years in the United States.

Charles says he's run across bigotry, a few "odd people" in Bakersfield, but not flat-out oppression. "Wherever you go, [racism] is bound to be there," he shrugs. "All over the world, people *are* prejudiced, so that's something that's kind of universal." You mean Spike Lee's wrong, and it's possible for blacks to be racists? A cop car passes, and Charles hides the brown bag. "I would really say that maybe this country is one of the best, both in terms of social life and everything else." We expected Charles to be our firebrand, to deliver a scathing manifesto against America's heart of darkness. Instead, he calls it a "great, great nation."

We bid him farewell and strike out for the fireworks show. His testimony unsettled me. I had planned to use Bakersfield as a symbol of the Fire Next Time, the currents of racial separatism which flow just beneath the flag worship. Only ten minutes into town yesterday, we saw two things which bore out my premise. The first was a hayseed type with "100% HONKY" tattooed on his left shoulder blade. Moments later, we found ourselves behind a car with a license-plate frame which read, "PIUTE INDIAN... TRUE AMERICAN." While others saw unity, I sensed imminent chaos.

But Charles's words skewed my thesis. It might be shitty in America, but maybe, just

maybe, it's shittier everywhere else. In conversation after conversation, I've had Iraqi, Vietnamese, Salvadoran, and other immigrants tell me how great this country is. The only people I've heard complain are the ones who were born here, like me. I begrudge George Bush his words from a speech earlier in the day: "We are very *lucky* to call America our home." What other country would tolerate this magazine? Morocco? South Korea? *England*? Anywhere else, I'd be floating in a river with my balls stuffed in my mouth.

As we walk up to the stadium beeline, I find a Halloween mask lying in the hot, wet grass. It's a generic demonic carnivore with small horns and wolflike fangs. I liked it so much, I wore it on *ANSWER Me!*'s cover. We are given small U.S. flags on plastic sticks as we file into the open-air incinerator.

There's a choir, more unlistenable speeches, and the same T-Birds and fire engines from the morning's parade. Then comes the crowd-pleaser, a dope-sniffing German Shepherd from Bakersfield's police department. A "drug suspect" stands on one end of the playing field, wearing enough padding to qualify as a Michelin

The fireworks start, and, by gosh, it's just like a Bon Jovi concert. The show is called, imaginatively enough, "Proud to Be an American." Seeking to evade a traffic quagmire, we head for the parking lot. People sit on their car hoods, staring upward, their eyes lit by the colorful fusillade. We search for our rent-a-car under the strobe effect of skyrockets and total darkness. It feels like Baghdad under siege.

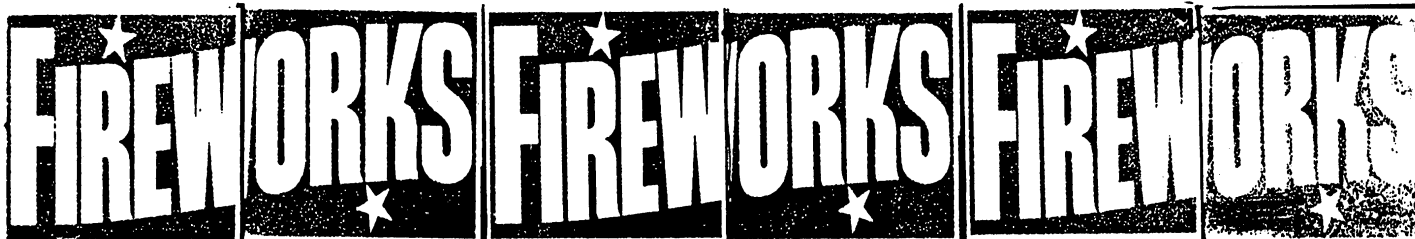
The temperature has finally fallen under a hundred, so the air conditioner begins to spout wisps of cool oxygen. I vibrate the windows with a live cassette of Napalm Death. Combined with MAX AIR, the speedmetal ices my perspiring skin. I chew the grisly cud of the day's events. *Yeah, I think, these people like big explosions and the concept of mass destruction. They celebrate America's killing capacity in a detached, cinematic way. They've been bombarded with violent images to the point of insensateness. But if they came face-to-face with some real carnage, they'd spit up their hot dogs and corn-on-the-cob. Or at least they wouldn't dig it so much.*

I park outside a liquor store at First and Chester, on the poor side of town. The store offers all the legal intoxicants: alcohol, tobacco,

and-run accident, this at California and I Streets. Two pedestrians were near a crosswalk when they were apparently struck by a vehicle which was headed westbound on California. The vehicle then fled the scene. Another vehicle heading west on California apparently did not see the victims who had been struck, and they were struck again. [Name withheld at editors' discretion], 39, of Bakersfield was pronounced dead at the scene. Another victim was taken to Memorial Hospital with major injuries.

We mingle into the murky crowd which surrounds the crash site. The victim, whom the locals call "Catfish," lies crushed and bloody under a convertible sportster. People stand expressionless, eyes fixed on the cadaver, while a tow truck is summoned. We quietly ogle for almost an hour, until it's ten minutes to midnight. When workers finally position the truck to hoist the car off the corpse, a group of firemen lift canvas tarps, blocking the audience's view.

Moans rise from the crowd. "Shit! I can't see!" somebody whines.



Man impersonator. Through bullhorns, the police ask him to surrender. He doesn't, and the doggie chases him down, clamping onto his arm and wrestling him to the turf. The multitude roars. **YEAH! RIP HIS GUTS OUT! SPREAD HIS ENTRAILS FROM END ZONE TO END ZONE!**

The wooden soldier from the City Hall ceremony gives another lumbering speech. He calls "Eye-rack" a "barbarous nation" and says, "The independence of America has been challenged by hostile countries since 1776." He fails to specify exactly how Eye-rack jeopardized America's independence.

"Will you fight for your country?" he asks, and I answer, "No." I say this quietly, to avoid being lynched. "I ask that you vigorously agree with my challenge to take arms," continues the embodiment of Kern County's military sexiness. "I ask that you fight, and fight to win. The freedom of America is in your hands. I also ask that you pray, as everyone before you has prayed, that this will indeed be the last war, and may your children never experience the pain brought on by war." I'm confused—you want us to fight, but you *don't* want us to fight?

Lotto tickets, and scabrous, cellophane-sealed porno mags. My guts twitter as I peep at cans of bourbon mixed with cola in handy six-packs. DELANO SATANAS BLOOD is etched onto the Lotto stand, calling to mind my recent trip to Kansas, where I saw TOPEKA CRIPS painted in blue. L.A. gangs pop up in the weirdest places.

We lounge in the car and observe a series of alkies hit the store for second and third rounds. A fat prostitute in an ass-high, bubble-gum-colored skirt walks out toting a forty-ouncer of 8-ball for herself, one for her pimp. An ambulance shrieks by, and we debate whether or not to chase it. We stay put for a few minutes. Two white cops wheel slowly past us, staring into our car, and then make a U-turn two blocks down. Feeling conspicuous, we jet.

On California Avenue we encounter a dotted line of pink warning flames and are forced to turn off. We see fire engines and ambulances, but it ain't a parade. We park and investigate.

Someone has been killed. Local television news would later describe what happened:

Last night around 10:30 here in Bakersfield, there was yet another hit-

"Aw, man, I've been waiting a half hour!" complains someone else.

"I'm gonna be sick," says a small girl, who then giggles and cranes her neck for a better look. Even though many seem to have known Catfish personally, they surge from the pavement onto the street to catch a glimpse of his mangled carcass.

Three teenaged males crouch on their haunches, gazing at the wreckage as if it were a TV screen. A chubby Mexican walks past them and laughs, "You guys are really *into* this shit!" They look up, smile, and continue watching.

This is the real thing, brains lying on the ground, and the spectators love it. I guess I was wrong. They crave blood, whether sanitized on the screen or warm and sticky on the concrete. A human sacrifice delivered them from evil (and boredom). Staring at the dead body with passive interest, we feel like true Americans. That's what's so fucking scary. ■

Centerfold: The real thing. ➡

